

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

To my friend Igoric,

As per your request in our last correspondence, I send this missive along with one of our best.

Though he is yet only a major of Ysenden's army, I can say with full confidence that this is a soldier who will rise high within our ranks, perhaps even to a seat on the Chancellor's council or beyond. Not only is he a master of the arts you seek to challenge the prince in, but he bears a keen mind and ever keener tongue. He speaks the language of man better than many of our own scholars, and might well prove more than an instructor in just the blade, if given the opportunity.

Put simply: I have lent you the sharpest and brightest of our swords.

I do hope it will not be forgotten.

All the best,

Ly'vena

- - private letter to King Igoric al'Dyor of Viridian,
 - from High Chancellor Ly'vena Fehr'en of Ysenden
- c.300p.f.
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Ciriak as'ahRen, Lord Commander of Ysenden, stood with arms crossed over his broad chest, back resting against the wall of the High Chancellor's study. The sword slung over one shoulder was uncomfortably pinned between him and the stone, but the weight of it was familiar and reassuring, just as was the heft of its twin hanging from his left hip. What was more, he didn't have much opportunity to move given his intentions for the evening, his choice of location deliberately just to the right of the chamber's double doors, wedged into the corner of the short, perpendicular wall that formed the lower north side of the depressed, arched entrance.

It was strange for him to be standing in that room. Ordinarily it was the High Chancellor's single place of privacy, the one room in the entirety of the city where he could be separate from the rumblings and filth of Ysenden politics. Of late in particular, the Chancellor had been retreating to the study every night he could as the sun set, seeking the refuge of the quiet space after his daily toil. Ciriak could understand why, of course. For one thing the ancient factions of the *er'endehn* had reared their ugly heads again, the unity of their race cracking and breaking despite long centuries of working together. The driving out of the old inhabitants of Erraven and their descendants a few months prior had been particularly ugly business, as had the gorilla assaults Ysenden had suffered ever since those exiled had settled once more behind the thick walls of the long-ruined keep.

For another, though, the study was as breathtaking as any other of Ysenden's miracles, and Ciriak could not complain about this rare opportunity to observe the space in earnest.

Like the arch he stood under, the north and south walls on either side of him started out perpendicular to the floor before curving upwards to meet in a perfect point. Near the far end of the chamber—some twenty or thirty feet from the doors—those walls ended, replaced by a score of flat, clear glass plates that formed a half dome which looked west to the very horizon, over the white and grey of the Vyr'esh far below them. It was a newer edition to the study, commissioned only a hundred years before, once half a millennia and then some had passed without sign of the Witch and her infernal winged beasts.

Bookshelves lined every flat surface—ordained with as many curios and artifacts as tomes and texts—and overhead the line of moonwing lanterns the servants changed every day hung in anticipation of a late night, illuminating the chancellor's ornate desk of polished wood and tempered obsidian. There should have been other furniture too—a scattering of decorative seats and chairs—but Ciriak had personally spent a good half-hour removing them from the chamber and hiding them about the great library connected to the study.

Too many were already aware of his plan. He'd seen no need to dodge awkward questions by involving others in setting the stage.

Admittedly, it was possible Ciriak's intentions had already been foiled, unfortunate as it was. The whispers that had encouraged him to form this plot had spoken of events that should have been carried out a quarter-hour before, as the sun's lowest tip reached the distant edge of the world. The light of dusk had filled the room in a breathtaking array of yellows and oranges, making even the books shine with dimming warmth, and Ciriak had tensed in preparation.

Then the sun had sunk lower, and that light had turned red as blood.

"*Damn,*" Ciriak cursed under his breath, considering his options. If the guilty parties somehow knew they'd been found out, there was a good chance the four of them were already on their way out of the city, likely heading for Erraven to join the other rebels. He knew only one name—General Ryvus' spies hadn't been able to gather much more than that—but if he acted quickly then Ciriak might just be able to capture at least *one* perpetrator. It would likely leave the rest to escape, but there was a good chance their little group had been getting information from someone higher up, closer to the High Chancellor's inner circle. If he could snatch up Emmehk vy'Ur, then Ciriak would at least have the chance to find out if there was a traitor in the upper ranks of the city's officers, maybe even seated at the—

The faintest whisper of footsteps across the walkways outside jerked the Lord Commander from his thoughts, and he quickly stood up straight, careful not to make a sound.

One, two, three... four people, he counted silently, smiling grimly to himself. He wasn't displeased that these agents of rebellion had only been delayed in their planned attack, but he had to admit to a touch of disappointment. Even if they were the enemy, he or his seconds had very likely had a hand in training this little group.

Which meant that if they'd been *truly* prepared for what they came to do, there would have been no delay for Ciriak to stew in.

Their loss, the Lord Commander thought to himself with the faintest shake of his head as he heard the near-silent footsteps getting closer and closer. Fifteen seconds later they stopped directly outside the doors he stood beside, and in the pause that followed Ciriak heard the barest whisper steel sliding out of a half-dozen scabbards. He knew the signal to attack to come as a silent gesture, so he braced himself.

WHAM!

The doors burst open as boots planted heavy kicks just under both outside handles, breaking open the lock that was already largely decorative. Ciriak had tested the space himself thrice over, but all the same he felt his cheek twitch involuntarily as the thick wood swung inwards at him, only to jerk to a stop barely an inch from his face as the perpendicular wall to his right caught the edge of the door. His view now blocked, Ciriak listened as four pairs of feet sprinted into the study, and he could imagine blades raised and ready to swing. To their credit, not one among the traitors raised a voice that might have alerted any nearby sentry.

At least not until they realized the room was empty.

"*What is this?!*" a man's voice gasped.

Smirking, Ciriak uncrossed his arms, put a hand on the door, and shoved.

It swung away from him with a scrape of wood on stone as he forced the edge to dislodge itself from the rough-hewn wall. That was, of course, more than enough to draw the attention of the four figures standing

with their backs to him as the room revealed itself once more, and to a one they whirled in a flash of blades, spinning to face him with weapons—four swords and two knives between the lot—held high. Two of the would-be-assassins even started forward, instinctively looking to make a preemptive attack on the surprise presence that had appeared at their rear.

They faltered the moment the light of the sunset reveal Ciriak's bearded face to them.

"Spirits save us," the one furthest to the right—a another man—hissed. *"Lord Commander..."*

Ciriak didn't acknowledge his title, preferring instead to study the group one after the other as he took one step into the study, then another. As one the four of them backed away in equal measure, retreating further into the room until he had come to stand directly between them and the door, hands by his sides.

"Well..." Ciriak grumbled. *"This is a sorry sight, if I do say so myself. What shame must a soldier of the er'endehn suffer to convince them to cover their face, I wonder...?"*

Several hands twitched upward at his quiet barb, as though more than one of the group wanted—if just for a second—to tear away the dark cloths that covered every nose and mouth. Their garb, too, was similar, black-grey wool and cotton that was absent any hint of the gold filigree of Ysenden's mark.

"Where is the High Chancellor, as'abRen?"

At the woman's voice, Ciriak turned his attention to the slender form of the figure second from his left.

"Not here, it would seem," he answered after a moment. *"Though I have to wonder what made you think this was the place to look for him."* He gestured lazily about the room. *"A leader should vet their information before acting on it, don't you think?"*

"No," a distraught, masculine voice spoke up from the left of the woman. *"No. That can't be. He should be here. He's been here every night for months!"*

Ciriak locked eyes with this third member of the group. *"I suppose that would make you Emmek vy'Ur?"* he asked slowly, smiling a little when the figure's dark features paled at the question. *"Oh yes. I know who you are, trainee. Cadet of the Chancellor's Guard, still doing your years cleaning the barracks. It's a pity. Another half decade and you and I might have met to see if you had the mettle for the job."*

"Spirits take the Chancellor!" the woman to his left—apparently the leader of the group—spat, taking a step forward more out of anger than courage if Ciriak had to guess. Her obsidian sword and dagger flashed in the dusk light as she pointed the former right at his chest. *"This isn't the end. You will tell us where he is, and we will seek him out if it costs us our lives! It is time for our kind to be ruled by one of our—"*

"Silence."

Ciriak's voice, still calm, dripped with frozen command. The elf stopped talking at once, faltering in her approach, and the Lord Commander finally reached for the hilts of his own weapons.

"You are correct, if only partially so." He spoke steadily as he drew the black, curved swords together, slowly pulling them from their sheaths. *"This will cost you your life—it has already, in a way—but the same need not be true for your comrades. Tell them to drop their blades, and I will allow your head to be the only one that rolls in the next moments."*

Beneath her mask, Ciriak saw the leader visibly swallow, her eyes darting left and right as his weapons came completely free. On either side of her, the rest of the group was backing away again, but that didn't stop the woman from snarling threats even as she started to do the same.

"One more step and you will bear the cost of the humiliation you have caused us, as'abRen!"

"Meaning you are indeed Erraven sympathizers," Ciriak said with a nod, not even hesitating as he continued his approach. *"That's one question answered, at the very least."*

The leader looked momentarily stricken, realizing her slip of the tongue, but her anger was already overpowering her common sense.

"We are the lifeblood of Erraven!" she hissed, clearly deciding that if the cat was out of the bag she may as well dive deep. *"We are no sympathizers! Our sires were proud soldiers of—!"*

"Your sires were the scattered leftovers of a broken city that Ysenden accepted despite a millennia of bloodshed between us," Ciriak cut across her coolly, still pressing the foursome back with steady, lazy steps. *"Do not lecture me on pride, child. I have likely lived longer than any three of you put together. Of everyone in this room, I am the only one who lost friends to the old wars, who lost family. I do not know where this newfound hatred of your people has climbed up from these last few years—this pride in a long-fallen banner—but it is a waste of time, and a waste of lives."*

"You mock the sacrifices of our people!" the last of the group, to the right of the leader, snarled as the back of his legs found the edge of the High Chancellor's desk. *"You mock those who fell so that Ysenden could stand against the Witch!"*

For the first time all evening, Ciriak felt the bite of anger at the words.

"I mock no one, boy!" he rumbled, fixing the offender with a stare that made generals go rigid. *"I merely pity this vain cause you have all decide throw your lives away for. No, that is enough."* He cut the leader short as she looked about to speak again *"None of us are here tonight to debate the merit of rebellion against a seat that has done nothing but vied for seven hundred years for the integrations of our old sects. You, you, and you—"* he lifted a sword to point at each of the masked elves in turn, forgoing only the woman *"—as Lord Commander of Ysenden, I hereby arrest you for treason and the attempted murder of the High Chancellor. As for you—"* he finally addressed the fourth *"—it is too late, but I will give you the choice of how you wish to—"*

He wasn't at all surprised when—even as he turned back her—the leader lunged at him, seeking to take advantage of the brief moment of distraction as his eyes had gone to the others one by one. She made not a sound as her sword lead the attack, a clean, steady thrust at his chest that would have made even the most talented among Ysenden's soldiers proud. The strike was direct, without feint or fault, and Ciriak thought it likely most swordsmen might well have fallen to that speed and precision.

Even the attacker, though, didn't offer so much as a blink of surprise when his own sword swept up, dragging the offending blade away so that it cleaved through the air barely an inch from his right arm, his left weapon thrusting in and up in the same motion. The obsidian split through her flimsy garbs without so much as a catch, running her through at an angle as her own momentum carried her into the killing blow. Not done, however, Ciriak planted a foot and pivoted, twisting the impetus of her still-moving body so that she lunged past him even as her own weapons fell limply from her hands. With a hard flex of the wrist and a clean pull, he withdrew his sword from her side as she dropped away from him toward the broken doors, spraying the ground with an arc of blood as he finished the full turn.

In the end, Ciriak was left facing the three remaining figures as though he'd never even looked away, the only sign that anything had changed in the two seconds that had passed being the wet red that dripped from his left blade and the limp *thumps* of the corpse tumbling down to roll across the floor at his back.

"She chose well," the Lord Commander said, eyeing the trembling swords and daggers of the others one at a time. *"But you need not. Drop your weapons and submit for questioning. Otherwise, I cannot promise your deaths will be anything so quick."*

For a long, tense moment, no one moved.

Then—with heavy *thumps* and ringing *pings*—blades began to fall.